

Though currently indifferent, young Germans may begin to reject the EU if economic conditions worsen.

by Blog Admin

As part of our Euroscepticism collaboration, [Britta Busse](#), [Alexandra Hashem-Wangler](#) and [Jochen Tholen](#) look at the attitudes of young Germans towards the EU. Using in-depth interviews, they find that while German youth are generally positive about European integration, they feel that the EU needs Germany more than Germany needs the EU. They also warn that a deterioration in the economic situation for German young people may harden their attitudes towards the European project.



Until the start of the Eurozone crisis, sociological research on integration in the European Union depended very much on the idea of “permissive consensus” by the people, meaning a tacit acceptance of EU policy. In this context and in Germany in particular, the political and economic elites who pushed for the deepening and enlargement of the EU, and for the introduction of the euro, were not forced to consider their relationship with, and the approval of, Europe’s citizens.



But this has changed. The newest research into public opinion in Europe has found a loss of trust and an increasingly unsettled relationship between Europe’s governing bodies and voters. Now, the prevailing notion of the EU’s relationship with its citizens has developed towards a “constraining dissensus”, as belief in the comprehensive projects aimed at closer European cooperation is no longer shared by the majority of the people. In this context, political and economic elites in the member states, as well as at the European level, are aware that the EU and its political institutions are dependent on a certain degree of public approval. Particularly in those member states where the constitution does not allow for a referendum (like in Germany), politicians are acting between two partly contradictory levels: The domestic and national state level, and the European level.



We focus on two different Euroscepticism ‘stances’ that have been developed:

1. Soft stance: This represents the criticism of *single* manifestations of the EU, such as its policies and institutions, *without* putting the *entire* EU into question,
2. Grim stance: This is a general *rejection* of the *entire* political and economic process of EU integration.

In Germany, according to Eurobarometer data, the sense of “EU integration harmony”, between voters, social elites and political parties, which until relatively recently had been very stable, has crashed. According to [surveys from 2011](#), the proportion of Germans that feel that Germany benefits from the EU is 48 per cent, lower than the EU average of 52 per cent. Using net-benefit figures (the number of people who recognise benefits, minus those people who do not see any benefits), the picture sharpens even more. Whereas the EU average rate for net-benefit is 15 per cent, this rate is 6 per cent for Germany. Only the rates in Italy (2 per cent), Cyprus (2 per cent), Latvia (0 per cent), Austria (-2 per cent), Greece (-3 per cent), Hungary (-9 per cent) and the UK (-19 per cent) are lower.

In particular, the further enlargement of the EU is now viewed very critically by Germans. Eurobarometer demonstrates that in no other EU member country, with the exception of Austria, is the rejection of further EU enlargement so strong, at 71 per cent, whereas only 22 per cent are pro-enlargement. What makes these figures all the more worrying is that all German governments have acted as a driving force (together with France) for the further integration and enlargement of the EU.



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At present, it is unclear how Germans would react if the country's €190 billion share of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) loan guarantee was to actually turn into real payment obligations. Considering that the people in Germany opposed the creation of the euro more than in any other member state, we assume that Germans (including young people, whose futures might be deteriorating because of the Eurozone crisis) would become openly hostile towards the EU. This cannot be ignored by the economic and political elites.

As part of the European MYPLACE project, in the late autumn of 2012 we interviewed 30 West German young people between 16 and 25 about politics. When they were asked about the European Union and the role of Germany within it, young people generally mentioned some positive aspects, but were critical of the current political state of the EU. They perceive the EU as an elitist project which does not encourage or enable the political participation of young people.

Positive aspects of the EU

The positive points most often highlighted by young people were the freedom of travel within the EU and the fact that there is no longer a need to change currencies when traveling. Some also pointed out that the abolition of strict border controls also means easier import and export routines for the economically strong and centrally located Germany:

“Well, we are for sure a very, very important country in Europe, because of our economically strength. There are many people living here, so we also play an important role, because of the density of our population ... In former times, we were also considered as ‘Europe’s heart’ ... or we considered ourselves that way.”

Indifferent/ambivalent views on the EU

For some young people, the central role of Germany in the EU is also the reason that they have a critical view of the EU. They see that it is difficult for Germany to play an important position in the EU, because of its former involvement in the two World Wars. Nevertheless, Germany now has an economically strong position within the EU from which many commitments have arisen: e.g. payments for countries which are not

able to follow financial EU guidelines. Thus they think:

“Well, I think Germany is important for Europe. But actually I don’t think that Europe is that important for Germany.”

Moreover, the majority of young people criticised the obligations that are being placed on Germany to support indebted countries such as Greece. These respondents fear that their country is being exploited and believe that the financial support should be lower. Additionally, the interview participants expressed a critical position towards tendencies towards globalisation as these are connected with the clash of very different cultures and a loss of sovereignty. They already feel that they (as individuals) have very little political power within Germany. But one voice among 82 million voices counts more than one voice among 500 million voices in the EU:

“There are so many problems connected with it. First of all ... suddenly there are not 80 million voices any more, but, I don’t know, one billion voices? [...] This means I suddenly have much less power with my voice.”

Finally, our qualitative interviews illustrated that EU politics is not at all transparent for German young people. They feel that there are fewer prospects for participating at the EU level than there are at the national level. This leads us to the conclusion that there are emerging *parallel worlds*.

On the one side, the parliamentary democracy of an EU member state fosters tendencies towards professionalised participation of its citizens at the national level, which is then much more complicated at the EU level. Even though a range of youth projects and initiatives that aim to foster commitment to the EU formally exist, these reach only a minority of young people. None of the individuals that we have interviewed in this context has ever referred to participation in an EU-funded project or organisation.

On the other side, there are young people who engage in projects and institutions that display a form of self-organisation, mostly at the local level, that is distant from the conventional political engagement patterns that make any reference to the EU. Youths prefer to shift their engagement from smaller to bigger things – as they perceive it “from feasible projects to more abstract things”.

Currently young people in Germany prefer the “soft stance” towards the EU. But if the ESM’s loan guarantees turn into real payment obligations (which has already started with a real cash payment of €730 million for 2013), and if the socio-economic conditions in Germany worsen and thus the currently record low youth unemployment rate of 7.9 per cent in January 2013 (the EU average is 23.6 per cent) increases, a majority of young people could move to a “grim stance” towards the EU, much sooner than expected.

This post is part of a collaboration between British Politics and Policy, EUROPP and Ballots & Bullets, which aims to examine the nature of euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range of perspectives.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Britta Busse - *University of Bremen*

Britta Busse holds a Masters degree in sociology. From 2008-2012 she worked as a Research Assistant at the department for social science research methods, Darmstadt University of Technology (project funded by the German Research Foundation: "Experimental Mobile Phone Panel"). Since March 2013: Research Assistant at the Institute Labour and Economy, University of Bremen (project funded by the EU: "MYPLACE").



Alexandra Hashem-Wangler - *University of Bremen*

Dr. Alexandra Hashem-Wangler is co-leader in the EU-research project MYPLACE ("Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement") at the Institute Labour and Economy at the University of Bremen. Her former doctoral research at the Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (BIGSSS) focused on youth culture and transitions, life course research methods, social change, transformation processes in Eastern Europe, and identity construction.



Jochen Tholen - *University of Bremen*

Dr. Jochen Tholen is research director at the Institute Labour and Economy, at the University of Bremen, Germany. He holds master degrees in economy and sociology and his research areas are labour relations, management and related studies with a focus on Europe and transition countries.



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